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CANADA

Father of accused in alleged Coutts blockade murder conspiracy says son was radicalized online, as others dispute RCMP narrative

Police have charged 13 people. The allegations have not been tested in court

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Thu., Feb. 17, 2022 | 8 min. read

 Article was updated Feb. 18, 2022

READ THE CONVERSATION (24)

LETHBRIDGE, Alta.—The father of a man facing a charge of [conspiracy to commit murder](#) says his son had become increasingly radicalized online before he was arrested and accused of plotting to kill police officers in connection with the border blockade in Coutts, Alta.

In an hour-long interview at the Lethbridge home they share, Mike Lysak described the frustration he says he's felt over the past two years watching his son, Chris, fall further and further into an online world of [COVID-19](#) misinformation.

The Star spoke to Lysak and others connected to the arrests this week, in interviews that open a window into the journey that has led some of the accused to this point. Police have described the arrests as focusing on “a small, organized group” engaged in “dangerous criminal activity occurring away from the TV cameras” that “could have been deadly for citizens, protesters and officers.” Some of those interviewed called into question or outright rejected the RCMP's characterization of events.

Lysak, for his part, said a few years ago, things were different — “Then came COVID and all this misinformation.”



There was even a flag flying outside of the house that, for Mike Lysak, had come to symbolize the bizarre online world his son was entangled in. The black flag with a white, diagonal line running through it, is known to represent an online community called Diagonon, characterized by observers as a far-right extremist group.

The flag was still flying there the day this week when police showed up to search the home after the arrest of Chris Lysak and a dozen others.

Lysak, 48, is one of four people charged with conspiracy to commit murder after police swept through spots where protesters had gathered in the tiny border town to decry COVID-19 vaccine mandates. He further faces one charge of uttering threats, as well as a possession of a weapon charge and a charge of mischief over \$5,000.

The charges against them have not been proven in court.

Mike Lysak says his son, an avid bodybuilder, never expressed violent tendencies.

During the past couple of years of the pandemic, he increasingly became involved in an online world, including into the Diagonon group, where misinformation about COVID-19 ran rampant.

"I've never seen him get violent, but I could feel the anger he was carrying around," Mike Lysak said of his son's demeanour.

Mike Lysak said his son would constantly watch Fox News and would go on the computer first thing in the morning to talk to others online who shared similar views about COVID-19.

"I wouldn't doubt that he was dealing with white supremacists or whatever from the United States, the way they were talking," said Mike Lysak. "He was listening to podcasts and so forth and he was just getting led down the path."

Arguments between the two over COVID-19 were common and after Mike Lysak got vaccinated, tensions between them became even further inflamed, said the father.

"They were influencing him," said Mike Lysak. "It was getting harder to talk to him."

Lysak was tied to the far-right, extremist group known as Diagonon by the Canadian Anti-Hate Network, which this week shared a [photo](#) to social media it said was Chris Lysak standing with the leader of the group.

“This is not a movement of angry frustrated truck drivers. ... These are people who want to bring about a violent revolution in order to create a white ethno-state,” said Stephanie Carvin, a national security expert, speaking generally about the group.

Mike Lysak told the Star his son had put up two flags at his house last summer.

“I was gone earlier this last summer; I come back, and he had these bloody flags hanging here,” said Mike Lysak.

There were multiple business cards in the home that Mike Lysak said were his son’s and that had a Diagonon emblem and link to Raging Dissident, the website of Jeremy MacKenzie, the de-facto founder of Diagonon, who has denied in videos online that it is a violent, extremist group.

On the back was the Diagonon flag with the words: “World gettin crazier out there? Its not just you. Find the others.”

When reached by the Star this week, MacKenzie said in an email that he’d met Chris before along with “thousands of people by now through my podcast and travels around the country.”

MacKenzie said he had “no knowledge of” the allegations. He also addressed the appearance of two Diagonon patches on a piece of body armour that police seized, alongside at least 13 long guns, handguns, multiple sets of body armour, a machete, a large amount of ammo and high capacity magazines.

“Other people have given out thousands of these cards and patches internationally, they could have come from absolutely anywhere.” he said.

“From what I recall, Chris is a kind man that loves his children,” added MacKenzie. “Besides extremely and violently consuming several large plates of steak, I don’t recall anything in our interactions to suggest he is violent or intends to be.”

MacKenzie, a 35-year-old Nova Scotian, is to appear in court in May after police searched his house earlier this year and found five restricted firearms, prohibited magazines, body armour and ammunition.

This week, Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino said that some of the arrests in Coutts were of people tied to far-right extremists who are also gathered in Ottawa as part of the broader Freedom Convoy. He did not identify individuals.

“Several of the individuals at Coutts have strong ties to a far-right extreme organization with leaders who are in Ottawa,” said Mendicino. “We’re talking about a group that is organized, agile, more knowledgeable and driven by an extremist ideology where might makes right.”

Chris Lysak was friends with Chris Carbert, 44, also charged with conspiracy to commit murder. Mike Lysak said the two decided to head down to the border together and ended up spending about two weeks there. They live near each other in Lethbridge.

Mike Lysak said he was unaware of any guns purchased by the two.

“If I’d have known he had that, I’d have turned him in before he ever went down there,” he said.

Mike Lysak said he was aware that his son had travelled outside Lethbridge to a property at least once where he met up with people who “had the same interests” last summer. The people there were involved with the online circles Chris Lysak was connected to, he said.

Of the 13 people arrested this week in relation to the protest in Coutts, Alta., which snarled cross border traffic for weeks, nine face possession-of-a-weapon charges along with charges of mischief.

But those who have spoken publicly claim they never had any violent intentions while in Coutts.

One of those people is Ursula Allred.

The 22-year-old from Magrath, Alta. — in her first public comments since being charged and released on bail — says she was in the “wrong place at the wrong time.”

She said she barely knew the four Alberta men charged with conspiracy to commit murder.

Allred had been living in Calgary and her boyfriend, Evan Colenutt, 23, of Raymond, Alta., along with their friends, Justin Martin, 22, Eastin Oler, 22, and Janx Zarembo, 18. All of them decided to head down to Coutts on her birthday, Feb 3.

“I’ve never even had a speeding ticket,” she told the Star at her family home in Magrath, Alta.

“I did not belong there. I don’t own any weapons. I’ve never been violent in my life. I’m just an LDS (Latter-Day Saints) girl.”

Allred said she simply didn't want to be alone on her birthday and, while she opposes vaccine mandates, didn't bring a weapon or hear anyone talk about committing acts of violence.

Allred said she was staying with Joanne Person, 62, who has a home in Coutts not far from where blockaders had their staging ground. Person is also facing a possession of a weapon charge and charge of mischief.

In the early morning hours of Feb. 14, Allred said she was at Person's house, where she'd been staying, when around 30 police vehicles swarmed the block. Tactical officers were on the scene, she said, and around 1 a.m. Monday, she was arrested.

Later, she was charged with possession of a weapon and mischief.

"Mischief? Being mischievous? I don't even know what that means," she said. "I didn't have any truck blocking the road or anything like that, which is what they were trying to say is what the mischief was for."

Her boyfriend and his friends were arrested elsewhere at a later time, Allred said.

"He's still in jail," she said of her boyfriend, Colenutt, as she wiped away a tear.

Allred said she met the people charged with conspiracy to commit murder at the protest and had seen them around several times over the two weeks she was there.

However, she said she was not aware of any association between her group and them prior to the protest kicking off.

Allred also claims that while she "knew there was some guns" around, she didn't know whose they were or what kind of guns they were. She says she had no idea anyone around her was ready to use violence. She says that she wasn't willing to use any, either.

When asked if the four men charged with conspiracy to commit murder had ever discussed being violent toward police around her, Allred said she hadn't heard talk of that sort.

"I don't think anyone should have had guns there," she said. "Like, it was a peaceful protest."

Martin Rejman, a lawyer representing Joanne Person and whose firm, Williamson Law, is representing some of the others accused, including Chris Lysak and the others accused of conspiracy to commit murder, was at Person's house in Coutts when the Star went there this week.

He said Person was a "victim of the circumstances" and described her as someone who simply cared about the cause and who opened her door up to others in order to help them. It was "wrong place, wrong time," he said.

"There was a lot of people here, in and out," he said. "She opened up her home to anybody that needed help."

Rejman also declined to comment about Chris Lysak.

With files from The Canadian Press



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